

# Mukund and Urmila Thatte Endowment Article

## Padma Shri Dr J.L. Gupta: A Brilliant Champion of Burns Care in India

Surendra Pal Bajaj<sup>1</sup> Dinesh Kadam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Plastic Surgery, Jaipur Golden Hospital, New Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, A.J. Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Mangalore, Karnataka, India

Address for correspondence Dinesh Kadam, MS, DNB, MCh, Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, A.J. Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Mangalore-575004, Karnataka, India (e-mail: drkadam@yahoo.co.in).

Indian J Plast Surg

After independence, the first elected government had a big task to do: improve the health of the masses. Late in the fifties and early sixties, large-scale constructions were undertaken on either side of Aurobindo Marg in Delhi. On one side, it was for the Institute of Excellence for Medical Education and Research—All India Institute of Medical Sciences. On the other side of the road, the Safdarjung Hospital, a world-class hospital for common citizens, was initially started to treat war victims in 1942. A young, enthusiastic man joined the hospital in 1963 at 35 years of age and took responsibility for building the first specialty hospital for plastic surgery in the Capital. In less than 5 years, this Department became the Mecca of Burns Management in the country.

This young man was Joginder Lal Gupta, fondly called “JLG” and as “chief” by his departmental colleagues (→**Fig. 1**). Dr. J.L. Gupta was born on July 4, 1928, in a small village in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh, a part of Punjab province previously. With practically no educational facilities, he had to walk miles away for school. He excelled in his studies and passed his matriculation examination at Dharmashala with First Division in 1945. He then went to Lahore to complete his intermediate—10th and 12th with flying colors.

During his younger days, Dr. Gupta was influenced by his *Chachaji*, Dr. Devichand, the most renowned doctor in the North Indian region. Following his footsteps, he secured admission to Lahore Medical College in Undivided India. In 1947, however, with the partition of India, he was relocated to a refugee camp at Jalandhar. He also reportedly sustained injuries during the partition. He was then persuaded to remain in Jalandhar and take up a clerical job. However, Dr. Gupta was determined to continue his medical education and took the help of a social worker and Member of Legisla-



**Fig. 1** Dr. Joginder Lal Gupta (July 4, 1928–January 23, 2024).

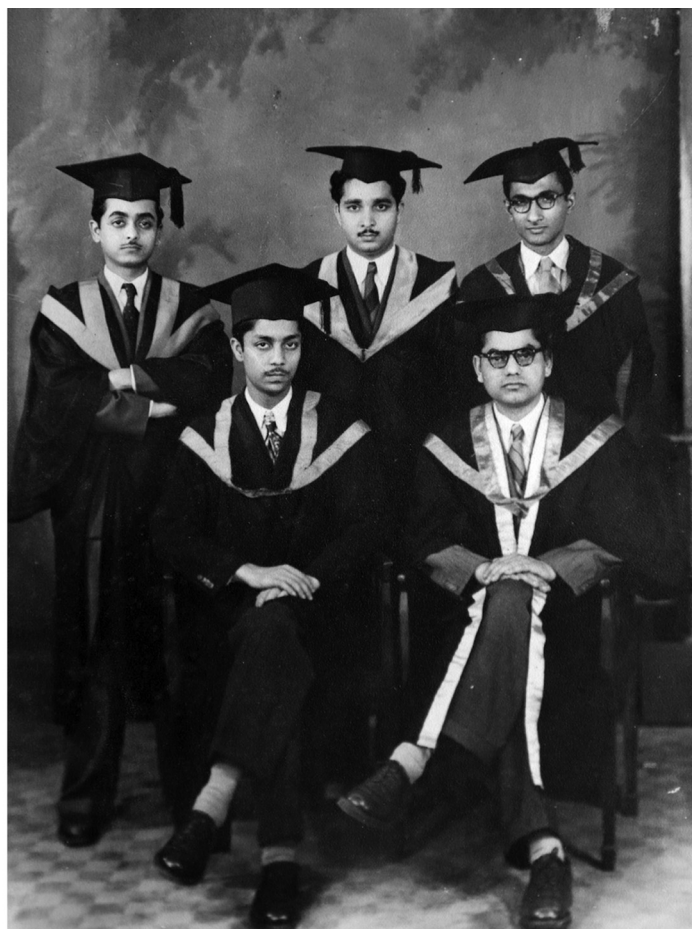
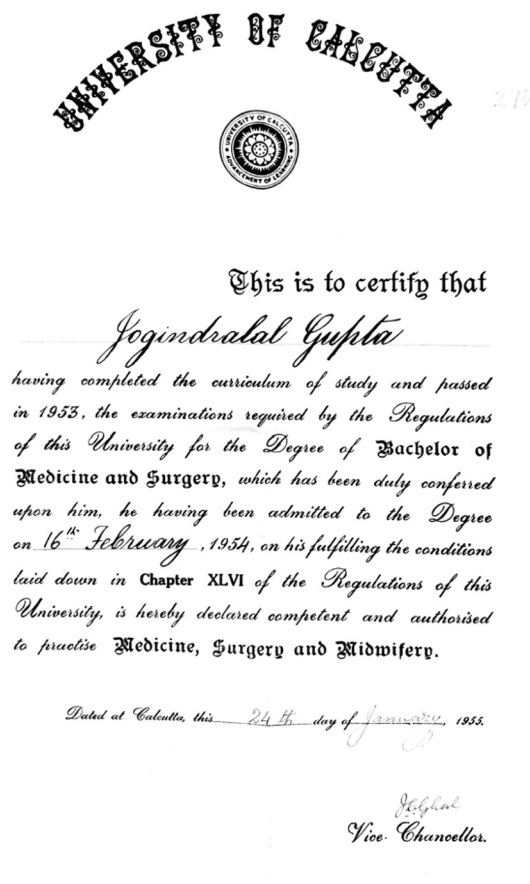
tive Assembly from Kangra West. He met the first Chief Minister (CM) of Punjab, Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, who wrote a letter to Dr. B.C. Roy, the CM of West Bengal, to relocate his MBBS seat. He was accommodated at R.G. Kar Medical College, Calcutta, and continued his medical education in an entirely new environment. Despite a cultural shift from Punjab to Bengal, he excelled at his studies. At Calcutta University, he bagged over 10 awards and gold medals for being a topper in Anatomy, Physiology, General Surgery, etc. (→**Fig. 2**). Entering as an outsider, he deeply imbibed the culture of Bengal and spoke Bengali fluently.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Gupta completed postgraduation in Surgery at Calcutta University (1954–1956) under stalwarts Prof. L.M.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0044-1786816>.  
ISSN 0970-0358.

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**Fig. 2** MBBS graduation with gold medals from Calcutta University, 1954.

Banerji and Prof. B.C. Roy, the CM of West Bengal. He chose his career in Plastic Surgery and left for the United Kingdom, travelling on a ship for about 1 month.<sup>1</sup> Determined to get his FRCS, Dr. Gupta studied extremely hard. He was qualified to get fellowships from all the three Royal colleges of the United Kingdom. He worked with legendary plastic surgeons, met Sir Harold Gillies and Alexander Burns Wallace, who published the "Rule of Nines" in 1951, and was a lecturer in the Plastic Surgery unit of Edinburgh University.

After 5 years of postgraduate training at various British Plastic Surgery centers, Dr. Gupta joined as a registrar in the Plastic and Maxillofacial unit at St. James Hospital, Leeds (► **Fig. 3**). During the same time, in 1961, Prof. C. Balakrishnan, the President of the Plastic Surgery section of Association of Surgeons of India (ASI) (► **Fig. 4**), was looking for a second faculty member to start the MCh Plastic Surgery teaching program at Government Medical College (GMC) Nagpur. Dr. Gupta showed keen interest in serving the country and applied for the post. He was interviewed in the India House, London, and selected for the post of Reader with a pay scale of Rs 500 to 800 with additional three increments on the recommendation of the Public Service Commission of Maharashtra.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gupta joined Prof. Balakrishnan, adapted well to the tough local conditions of Nagpur, and achieved results of international standards. The first MCh course in Plastic Surgery was started at GMC Nagpur in

1960. In 1961, a similar course MS in Plastic Surgery was also started at Patna Medical College, under Dr. Keswani. Dr. Gupta was the first external examiner in the country in 1963 for the first batch of students!<sup>2</sup>

In 1963, Prime Minister Pandit Nehru and Union Health Minister Dr. Sushila Nayar, were on a visit to GMC Nagpur to see a freedom fighter under treatment. They witnessed the work and importance of burns and plastic surgery specialty and invited Dr. Gupta to come to Delhi and start the facility at Safdarjung Hospital. Dr. Gupta moved to the Capital in 1963, set up a world-class center of Burns, Plastic Surgery, and Maxillofacial Surgery at Safdarjung Hospital, and started the MCh training program in 1966. The Department was chosen to accept war casualties of the Indo-Pak war in 1971 (► **Fig. 5**). In 1976, it was declared Department of Excellence by the Ministry of Health, Government of India (► **Fig. 6**). In 1983, the Hand and Microsurgery section was started. The department was set up in a separate hospital building, with its casualty, Outpatient Department, Laboratory, Operation Theatre, Physiotherapy, and Occupational Therapy services under one roof.

Dr. Gupta dedicated his career to burn victims and pioneered burn treatment and prevention at Safdarjung Hospital (► **Figs. 7 and 8**). He developed indigenous Silver Sulfa Diazine Ointment and collaborated with the Birmingham Burn Unit to develop a vaccine against *Pseudomonas*. In an





**Fig. 3** At the Plastic and Maxillofacial unit at St. James Hospital, Leeds, 1960.

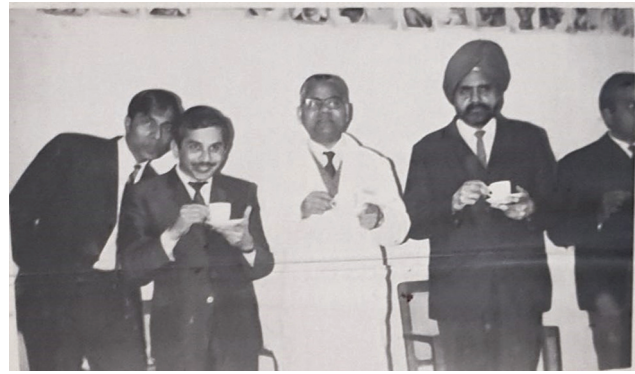


**Fig. 4** Plastic surgeons of India at the ASI conference in 1961 at Baroda.





**Fig. 5** Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi visiting the hospital.



**Fig. 8** 1974 (from left) Dr. Jakheta, Dr. Tiwari, Dr. J.L. Gupta, and Dr. Inderjit Singh.



**Fig. 6** With Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India.



**Fig. 7** 1974 (from left) Dr. Vimla Rajan, Dr. G.L. Jakheta (Trainee from 1971 to 1973), Dr. J.L. Gupta, and Dr. Inderjit Singh.



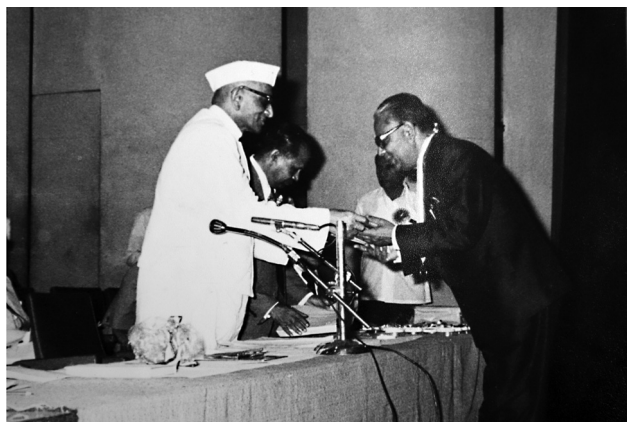
**Fig. 9** Receiving Padma Shri award from the President of India, Mr. V. V. Giri, 1974.



**Fig. 10** Receiving FAMS from The President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, in 1976.



**Fig. 12** Former President Giani Zail Singh, at the inauguration of the first NABI conference at MAMC, Delhi, 1991. MAMC, Maulana Azad Medical College; NABI, National Academy of Burns India.



**Fig. 11** Conferred Dr. B.C. Roy Award in 1976 by Shri Morarji Desai, former Prime Minister of India.

article published in the *Lancet* in 1979, he demonstrated a drastic reduction in mortality in the vaccinated group.<sup>3</sup> However, the research could not be continued due to the closure of the funding organization in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> He was the proponent of early tangential excision and skin grafting, demonstrating the benefit of survival and reduced hospital stay.

Dr. Gupta was a brilliant student throughout. Securing several gold medals and getting all three Royal College fellowships indicate his exceptional student career. With his illustrious career, Dr. Gupta received several awards. He was awarded Padma Shri by President Mr. V.V. Giri in 1974 (► **Fig. 9**) and received FAMS in 1976 from the President, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (► **Fig. 10**), and the Prestigious Dr. B.C. Roy's award was conferred by former Prime Minister Shri Morarji Desai in 1976 (► **Fig. 11**).

Dr. J.L. Gupta was a founding member of the Association of Plastic Surgeons of India (APSI) and served in various capacities. He took over as the fourth Secretary-cum-Treasurer from Dr. Charles Pinto in 1967, when the strength of the association was 66 members with 37 full members. During his long tenure as Hon. Secretary, Dr. Charles Pinto, Dr. R.L. Manchanda, Dr. R.J. Manickshaw, and Brig Dr. Ganguly, were elected to the office of the President of APSI. The APSI members' strength progressed to 120, funds for the Kilner Memorial award were raised, and Indian Council of Medical Research-endorsed Continued Medical Education (CMEs) were held, among other activities.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Gupta became President of the APSI in 1974 and delivered Gillies's Memorial Oration in 1979 and Sushruta's Oration in 1991 at Hyderabad.<sup>2,5</sup> He spoke in detail about the burden of burns, their prevention and management in Gillies Memorial Oration. In Sushruta Oration, he chronicled the development of the APSI and the roadmap ahead with clear objectives. Both these orations are accessible from the archives of *IJPS* that were published recently.<sup>2,5</sup> He was a voracious writer who wrote many articles on Plastic Surgery in the Tropics and edited India's first book on Plastic Surgery, published by MacMillan.

In 1983, at 55, he left the services because of some differences in administration. Even after retirement, he continued working for Burns. In 1991, he founded the National Academy of Burns India<sup>6</sup> and ensured it became a pan-India Association (► **Fig. 12**). Today, it has over 1,200 members, and its annual conferences are conducted across the Indian subcontinent (► **Fig. 13**).

Concerned about the plight of burn victims, he suggested a National Burns Prevention Program to the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh. After many meetings and discussions, a pilot project started, and now it is part of a 5-year plan.





**Fig. 13** At various National Academy of Burns - India Conference (NABICON), seen with Dr. R.P. Narayanan, Dr. Surendra Pal Bajaj, Dr. Karoon Agrawal, and Dr. S.K. Bhatnagar.

Because of his efforts, every medical college now has a burns unit, and there has been a massive increase in the workforce for treating burns.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Gupta remained personally involved in this program until the last day of his life.

Dr. Gupta will be remembered as a great institutional builder, a team developer, and a forward thinker (→Fig. 14). His son, Prof. Pawanindra Lal, is a renowned professor and Head of Surgery at the prestigious Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi. He also received the prestigious Dr. B.C. Roy award and has written book chapters in the prestigious Bailey and Love's Short Practice of Surgery (→Fig. 15). He

fondly remembers his father's passion for reciting famous Mirza Ghalib's *Shayari*, aptly and appropriately for various occasions.

Burn care was his passion until his last breath on January 23, 2024, when he passed away at the age of 95. With this, an era ends, and the curtain falls on burn care in India. Dr. Gupta is survived by his son, daughter-in-law, and two grandsons. Above all, he is survived by all the institutions he built and hundreds of students who passed through these great institutions—our tribute to this exceptionally brilliant soul.



**Fig. 14** Receiving Honors from the former President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam at NABICON 2012, Delhi.



**Fig. 15** Father and son (Dr. Pawanindra Lal) with B.C. Roy award medals.

**Conflict of Interest**  
None declared.

#### Acknowledgments

We are indebted to Dr. J.L. Gupta's son, Prof. Pawanindra Lal, the Professor and Head of Surgery at Maulana Azad Medical College, Delhi, for his input and providing photographs.

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